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CIA official doubts Casey / interview Says deathbed talk unlikely

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PRINCETON BOROUGH — The deputy director of the Central Intelligence Agency said here yesterday it was virtually impossible for investigative reporter Bob Woodward to have visited former CIA Director William Casey on his sickbed.

Deputy CIA Director Robert M. Gates said Casey was not only attended by his wife and daughter at the hospital but guarded as well by CIA agents around the clock.

In a new book, Woodward contends he entered Casey's hospital room and had a four-minute interview with the dying CIA director, who was suffering from brain cancer.

In that brief interview, Woodward maintains, Casey acknowledged he knew about the diversion of profits from arms sales to Iran to the Nicaraguan Contras.

CASEY'S WIDOW has maintained Woodward did not get in to see Casey.

Speaking to a group of undergraduate students at Princeton University's Woodrow Wilson School of International and Public Affairs, Gates said he did not know how Woodward could have interviewed Casey on his deathbed.

Woodward, in his book, "Veil: The Secret Wars of the CIA," says Casey told him in the hospital that he knew all along about the diversion of Iranian arms sales profits to the Contras.

According to Woodward's book, Casey told him he "believed" in the cause of the Contras, the U.S.-backed rebels fighting the Nicaraguan government.

GATES SAID although all testimony before the congressional committees investigating the Iran-Contra scandal this summer substantiated that no one at the CIA knew of the diversion, "whether Mr. Casey knew, I don't know," he said.

He said Casey's wife and daughter were with him virtually around the clock, with one woman in the hospital room during the day and one at night.

Additionally, two CIA officers were outside the room — one immediately outside the door and another down the hall with a view of the door and the hallway — 24 hours a day, he said.

"Those are the facts," he said.

CASEY'S WIDOW, Sophia, has denounced Woodward's book and the contention that he eluded hospital security to meet with Casey in a four-minute interview.

Casey died of pneumonia on May 6 after being hospitalized for months with brain cancer.

Investigators since have been unable to reach a definitive conclusion on whether the late CIA head knew of the secret channeling of funds to Central America.

Gates also defended the CIA against a statement, made by Secretary of State George Shultz during the congressional hearings, that the CIA misled the administration about the state of affairs in Iran and that the CIA "cooked" intelligence reports about that country.

THE CIA issued one report about Iran in 1985 that predicted a great deal of unrest in the country during Ayatollah Khomeini's reign and that the Soviet Union might be able "to get a foot in the door" during the turbulence, Gates said.

However, another CIA report eight months later reflected a change of view, he said. Khomeini's regime had proved to be more resilient and the Soviet Union had not been able to grab a foothold there, he said.

Gates, who fielded questions after speaking on the CIA's role in American foreign policy, said such charges by administration officials and policy-makers against the CIA were fairly routine.

The intelligence agency is often engaged in an adversarial relationship with policy-makers who accuse the CIA of "cooking" intelligence reports to reflect its own biases when they do not agree with the legislators' views, he said.

DURING the Vietnam War, administration officials often jabbed the CIA by saying "aren't you guys on our team?" Gates said.

Since the Iran-Contra scandal became public, the CIA has tightened internal policies to make approving covert action more difficult and to make covert action more accountable to laws and regulations, he said.

But laws themselves cannot prevent the possibility that someone will break them, he said.

Gates also said that the current heads of the CIA and National Security Council, William Webster and Frank Carlucci respectively, have enough experience "to keep people from going off the track again."